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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE LAMENTS COPENHAGEN "TRENCH FIGHTING" BUT
HOPES FOR BINDING TREATY

REF: SINGAPORE 1150

¶1. (U) Summary: As the United Nations Conference on Climate Change wound down in Copenhagen, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong criticized the event's "sound and fury" and "trench fighting" in remarks to Singaporean journalists. Participants did not adopt the right frame of mind, he said. Nevertheless, Singapore expressed its support for the resulting political accord, if only as a useful basis from which to negotiate a binding agreement. PM Lee reaffirmed Singapore's recently-announced emissions growth targets (reported reftel) but conditioned them on attainment of a binding international agreement. Singapore's mainstream media initially called the conference a failure, but a post-conference editorial in the government-linked Straits Times adopted a more positive tone, acknowledging American leadership as key to securing the climate change accord. End Summary.

Disappointed in Denmark but Hopes for Treaty Next Year

¶2. (U) Speaking to Singapore journalists in Copenhagen on December 19, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said he was "disappointed with the outcome" of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change but hoped that the work done so far would lead to a binding treaty within a year. PM Lee said participating countries should have begun contemplating the elements of a political statement on climate change in November, when Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen told other heads of state at a meeting in Singapore that a legally binding treaty would be unachievable at Copenhagen. "But over the last two months, there has been a lot of sound and fury, a lot of trench fighting over procedures," PM Lee said. Conference delegates locked into the resulting "close-quarter combat" lacked the right frame of mind to take a realistic view of politically feasible measures to combat climate change, he lamented.

¶3. (U) Despite PM Lee's disappointment, Singapore expressed its support for Copenhagen's outcome at the closing plenary session. The Singapore delegation commended the "sentiment, commitment, and good faith" of the countries that negotiated the political accord and noted that those countries "crossed all sections and interest groups" and "represented all of us." At the same time, Singapore declared its solidarity with the Association of Small Island States and called on the world to treat the Copenhagen accord as a basis for moving toward a binding agreement. PM Lee later reinforced this point, telling the press, "We are a small island nation too ... small, vulnerable, and alternative-energy disadvantaged. If there is no deal, we are in jeopardy."

Reaffirms Emission Goals - But Only If There's a Treaty

¶4. (SBU) In Singapore's national statement to the plenary

session in Copenhagen, PM Lee reaffirmed Singapore's existing pledge to reduce its emissions growth by 16 percent from the "business as usual" level by 2020. (Comment: "Business as usual" appears to mean the hypothetical emissions level that results from extrapolating current trends to 2020. Holding emissions growth below the "business as usual" trend rate does not imply a reduction in actual emissions. End Comment.) PM Lee's subsequent remarks to the press made it clear that even this modest pledge depends on the world's ability to achieve a binding treaty: "If there is a deal, we are committed to do our part. ... It is conditional on the agreement being reached and other countries also doing their part too." The PM noted that Singapore's Sustainable Development Blueprint already calls for a seven to 11 percent cut in emissions growth, but that in order to reach 16 percent, Singapore will have to evaluate new policies; these could include increasing domestic energy efficiency standards and adopting new fiscal incentives, such as a cap-and-trade mechanism or a carbon tax.

15. (U) Singapore's plenary session statement called on developed countries to take the lead in substantially reducing emissions and helping developing countries curb emissions without compromising economic growth. It also called for developing nations to reduce emissions in a manner consistent with their respective capabilities. PM Lee told delegates that Singapore reduced its carbon intensity by 30 percent between 1990 and 2006 by increasing its green cover, limiting the number of cars in use, and generating electricity from natural gas.

Singapore Press Ridicules, Then Endorses Copenhagen Outcome

16. (U) Singapore media lampooned the Copenhagen conference as a failure before ultimately shifting tone to endorse its outcome. The Sunday Times for December 20 ran a sardonic primer for those who "missed the entire Copenhagen summit," including this summary: "Whose fault was it that the meeting failed? Almost everyone's, if you go by the angry rhetoric. The US: Did not want to cut emissions more. China: Refused to allow outside checks. The European Union and other rich nations: Did not offer enough funding. Developing nations: Did not want to commit to legally binding cuts. Small island states: Wasted time arguing over procedures and walking out of talks halfway." Headlines that day included "Deal a Letdown After High Hopes" and the mocking "Copenhagen. Hopenhagen. Nopenhagen." Chua Chin Hon, the Straits Times U.S. bureau chief, wrote that opinion was divided as to whether President Obama was "the savior who brokered an eleventh-hour deal" or "a complete flop who failed to provide decisive leadership." Chua expressed the view that the failure to secure a binding agreement suited President Obama's interests because it gave him "another year of breathing space" to build domestic support for climate-change legislation in a difficult political and economic environment.

17. (U) By December 22, the editorial page of the Straits Times gave the Copenhagen accord a qualified endorsement, echoing PM Lee's position and acknowledging American leadership as a key factor in moving the discussions forward: "This accord has rightly been criticized for lacking specifics on how to limit Earth's temperature rise to two degrees Celsius by mid-century. But it is more constructive to take an encouraging view of the leadership shown by the United States on the one hand, and by the emerging bloc made up of China, India, Brazil, and South Africa on the other, to devise an agreement no matter how vague." The editorial called for short-term diplomatic efforts to focus on inducing compliance with the accord's request for member nations to state definite 2020 emission targets by January 31. Also on December 22, perhaps in an effort to balance positive commentary on U.S. efforts, Straits Times China bureau chief Peh Shing Huei took issue with critics who have blamed China for Copenhagen's limited achievement. At the same time, Peh called on China to "leap to the front line in the fight against global warming" even if such leadership entails some sacrifice.

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